



# How Not To Counter Disinformation

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The Biden administration's unveiling, last week, of a new "Disinformation Governance Board" at the Department of Homeland Security touched off a firestorm of controversy within the Washington beltway. In the aftermath of the botched rollout, political opponents of the administration have decried the effort as an Orwellian exercise in thought control and moved to defund it, while White House officials have scrambled to reshape perceptions that have spun wildly out of control.

But the frosty reception the new board is receiving should hardly have come as a surprise. The effort was bound to misfire, for at least four reasons.

First of all, timing is everything. A serious U.S. government effort to counter disinformation has been long overdue, given the well-established efforts of foreign actors (like Russia) to interfere in U.S. politics. But the rollout of the Biden administration's new board coming on the heels of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's successful multi-billion dollar bid to acquire (and subsequently liberalize) Twitter makes it look like the political Left is seeking to recapture control of a narrative it fears losing. Of course, the board was conceived of and organized long before Musk made his play for the social media platform. But the inauspicious timing has added fuel to the widespread critique that the Biden administration is intent on setting up a "Ministry of Truth" to police proper narratives and stifle dissenting political thought.

The second reason is a lack of transparency. The U.S. has grappled with foreign disinformation for a long time now, and that torrent of fake news has played a material role in diminishing trust in democratic institutions among ordinary Americans. But it is for precisely that reason that the board's mandate needed to be fully explained, and its powers enumerated, well ahead of its formal launch. The American people need to know exactly how the board functions, who is part of it and what its mandate will be. The White House failed to divulge any of that information in a timely manner, contributing to the perception that it had something to hide about the effort.

Third, the bureaucratic home of the new board is deeply problematic. While it is true that disinformation comes from a variety of sources, foreign adversaries are among the most egregious purveyors of it. By housing the board at the Department of Homeland Security, the administration is giving off the appearance that it only cares about narratives that affect domestic politics—things like divergent views on health mandates and immigration. Given that "fake news" has become an integral part of many of our adversaries' foreign policy, the natural place for an effort to counter it would be an agency that deals more directly with diplomacy, intelligence and national security.

Finally, it's a truism in Washington that personnel is policy. The newest addition to the U.S. government bureaucracy is beholden to the same principle. The selection of Nina Jankowicz—a social media-savvy political liberal who once sought to debunk the now-verified Hunter Biden laptop story as a foreign influence operation—to helm the board gives off the appearance that the body will be preoccupied first and foremost with enforcing what the administration believes to be the proper national political narrative. That image of partisanship is likely to persist, notwithstanding the fervent denials and assurances of administration officials.

All of which is deeply unfortunate, because "fake news" has become a serious political problem, and a distinct threat both to American influence abroad and to U.S. national security interests. At some point, Washington will indeed need to stand up a serious, transparent and bipartisan effort to counter the phenomenon. It's already clear, though, that the Biden administration's new board isn't it.